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THE CONY HIGH SCHOOL ASSEMBLY: AN UNCONSCIOUS EXPERIMENT IN TRAINING FOR CITIZENSHIP

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Special preparation for citizenship by methods other than, or auxiliary to, the course in civil government is not a new experiment in secondary schools. In some the class in civics has been organized as a mock legislature; in others the school discipline has been intrusted to a student board. Each of these methods, if successfully carried out, gives, doubtless, some measure of preparation for citizenship. Both, however, fall short in one respect. The mock legislature is so frankly artificial that it can give but slight sense of civic responsibility; and to intrust to the students the maintenance of discipline is, at best, to prepare them for a work in which but few citizens need participate—the actual maintenance of law and order. What is needed primarily to meet the conditions of our day, is training in the efficient and honest administration of the public purse.

This training, to be most effective, must not deal with money that is imaginary, or with money in which the pupils are not vitally concerned. On the contrary, it must involve an actual fund, raised by the student community itself and expended to meet its actual needs. Such conditions may seem, at first thought, difficult to obtain; yet it is under precisely these conditions that the high-school pupils of Augusta, Maine, in an organization entitled the "Cony High School Assembly," are giving themselves, all unconsciously, this financial training for citizenship.

The school in which this organization has grown up is a public high school numbering about two hundred pupils, situated in a town of about twelve thousand inhabitants. Here, thirteen years ago, when interscholastic athletics were first coming into favor the students were confronted with two problems. The first was: How should they pay for the equipment of a school gymnasium and meet the expenses of their athletic teams? Gate receipts were utterly inadequate; and

to solicit funds upon the business street was admittedly a public nuisance. Their solution was a fair, accompanied by amateur theatricals or other entertainment. At first they cleared annually from one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars. Later, under improved management, they increased this amount to five and even six hundred dollars. Thus, without resorting to public subscription, the students solved the problem of ways and means.

But their second problem was equally important: By what method should their money be apportioned? Their solution was certainly characteristic of this school as it was in the early nineties. Its debating society was then a hotbed of budding parliamentarians; its leading secret fraternity was devoting its evenings to mock legislative sessions; and, finally, one of its most influential students was serving his first term as page in the state senate. These circumstances made it but natural that the power to appropriate money from the common fund should be vested in a highly organized parliamentary body.

The precise form of this body, however, was determined by gradual evolution. As organized September 20, 1892, the Cony High School Assembly was like a New England town-meeting. It consisted of all the students in the school; was officered by a moderator and clerk and met, upon written call of any five members, to act upon the business named in the warrant. This simple organization, however, soon proved inadequate. Appropriations could be rushed through without due consideration, and, when once granted, might be misapplied with impunity. The assembly had no control over other school organizations; and some of them, notably the editorial board of the school magazine, did not scruple to incur a debt and then to expect the assembly to meet the deficit. Possession of the common purse, however, soon gave to the assembly its rightful ascendancy. Little by little it adopted legislation perfecting its own procedure and bringing the other organizations under its control; and at the close of the second year of its existence the assembly embodied these provisions in a new constitution.

Under this constitution, which has changed but little since its adoption eleven years ago, the assembly has become an organization much more like a state senate or house of representatives than like its original model, the town-meeting. An appropriation, for example,

must now be proposed in the form of an act; must be accompanied by a detailed statement of facts; must receive two several readings before its passage to be enacted; and must be posted on the school bulletin-board for at least twenty-three hours between the two readings. This last rule may be suspended, but only by unanimous consent.

As a further safeguard, the assembly forbids its treasurer to make payment except on a warrant signed by the moderator. This warrant specifies the date on which the appropriation was passed, the amount appropriated, and the person to whom it is payable. For the signature of the latter, moreover, the printed form provides also a blank receipt. Thus for each appropriation the treasurer at the end of her term of office (for the treasurer is now invariably a girl) submits to the Auditing committee both a warrant and a receipt. As the amount handled by the treasurer in a single year has, in one instance, exceeded \$1,300, the real importance of these safeguards is evident to every student.

But the assembly's watchfulness does not end when its appropriations leave the treasury. All officers that handle assembly funds—not alone its own officers, as the superintendent of the gymnasium and the chairman of the library committee, but also the officers of other organizations, as the managers of the several athletic teams—all are required to submit detailed reports, which are audited with the same care that is bestowed upon the treasurer's accounts.

In view of the elaborate nature of the organization just described it is perhaps an occasion for surprise that the assembly has survived and flourished through these thirteen years. A part of its success, doubtless, has resulted from the unobtrusive co-operation of the teachers, especially of the present principal, Mr. C. F. Cook. But the chief credit belongs to the students themselves. For several years it was the custom of the retiring officers to meet, during the summer vacation to drill the aspirants of the coming year for the duties that might devolve upon them. Later a secret fraternity was formed, with procedure similar to that of the assembly; and this not only gave excellent training in parliamentary practice, but, on several occasions, rendered service as a "good government club" in the cause of "civic righteousness. The custom, moreover, by which the clerk of one year usually becomes the moderator of the next has undoubtedly tended to preserve

the continuity of method while increasing the standard of efficiency.

To give a more definite idea of the usual method of procedure and the nature of the business done, a brief quotation from the Journal may be permitted. The following extract shows the transactions of the seventh, eighth, and ninth meetings of the assembly of 1899-1900. It is interesting not only because it illustrates, within a brief space, a considerable variety of procedure—the passage of a bill in regular course, of a bill under suspension of the rules, of an order, and of a resolution, and the election of an officer by ballot—but more especially because the particular votes here recorded are themselves significant.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1900

Assembly called to order by clerk and call read.

[Moderator took the chair.]

Journal of the last meeting approved without reading.

Mr. Sanborn, bill:

An act to appropriate five (5) dollars for expenses of delegates to Brunswick.

Bill received first reading, and February 21, 1900, 1 P. M., was set for second reading.

Moderator then called for nominations for the delegate to go to Brunswick with manager of baseball team.

Stone, 1900, and Russell, 1900, were nominated. Vote by ballot: total number of votes cast, 129; necessary for a choice, 65; Russell, 106; Stone, 23.

Moderator then announced Mr. Russell elected delegate.

Mr. Gannett, bill:

An act appropriating one hundred and fifty (\$150) dollars for the benefit of the Cony High School Library.

Bill received first reading, and February 21, 1900, 1 P. M., was set as the time for the second reading.

Mr. Gannett, order:

Ordered, That the moderator appoint a committee of five, to be known as the Library Committee.

Moderator then appointed the following: Mr. Cook, Mr. Gannett, Miss Reynolds, Miss Carver, Miss Downing.

On motion, adjourned.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 1900

Assembly called to order by clerk, and call read.

[Moderator took the chair.]

Journal of the last meeting approved without reading.

An act to appropriate five (5) dollars for expense of delegates to Brunswick came up by assignment; which was read the second time and passed to be enacted.

An act to appropriate one hundred and fifty (150) dollars for benefit of Cony High School Library came up by assignment; which was read the second time and passed to be enacted.

Miss Little, resolution:

Resolved, That a vote of thanks be extended to Mr. W. D. Stinson for the fine picture of Maine's late statesman, James G. Blaine, which he has so kindly presented to the school.

Read and passed.

On motion, adjourned.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1900

Assembly called to order by clerk, and call read.

[Moderator took the chair.]

Journal of the last meeting approved without reading.

Mr. Gannett, bill:

An act to appropriate one hundred and fifty (150) dollars for a piano fund.

The bill received its two separate readings [under suspension of the rules] and passed to be enacted.

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On motion, adjourned.[†]

In determining the value of the Cony High School Assembly as unconscious training for citizenship, we should consider, however, not only the method, but also the object of its appropriations. In a school in which athletic interest runs high, in which each athletic manager desires to make the best possible showing, and in which the annual fair by which the money is raised is avowedly given primarily for the support of school athletics, it must be a constant temptation to the students to appropriate practically their entire fund for merely current expenses. Yet in no instance has such a disposition of the funds been made. On the contrary, the assembly has uniformly invested a portion of its income for such purposes as books for the school library, pictures and statuary for the rooms, and apparatus for the gymnasium. Indeed, out of the \$4,263.28 appropriated by the assembly in the thirteen years of its existence, \$1,394.58, or nearly 33 per cent. has gone for these permanent improvements. The distribution of these appropriations by years will appear from the following table:

[†] The foregoing extract is transcribed from the original record by Mr. William M. Badger, 1901, clerk of the assembly of 1899-1900; *Journals*, Vol. IV, pp. 174-77.

SCHOOL YEAR	TOTAL APPROPRIATION	APPROPRIATION FOR PERMANENT IMPROVEMENT	
		Amount	Per Cent
1892-1893	\$187.56	\$31.95	17
1893-1894	72.47	34.50	48
1894-1895	107.00	15.75	15
1895-1896	93.00	30.00	32
1896-1897	209.10	50.00	24
1897-1898	149.79	25.00	17
1898-1899	164.17	50.00	30
1899-1900	490.90	342.50	70
1900-1901	519.48	190.83	37
1901-1902	519.49	193.75	37
1902-1903	583.19	135.40	23
1903-1904	672.30	141.80	22
1904-1905	494.83	153.10	31
Total.....	\$4,263.28	\$1,394.58	33

In this \$1,394.58 appropriated for permanent improvements, the several items are as follows: library, \$805.00; gymnasium apparatus, \$237.35;¹ toward a new piano, \$150.00; toward new blackboards, \$75.00; pictures and statuary, \$60.00; all other items \$67.23.

The interest which the assembly has manifested in improving the equipment of the school has exerted an influence even outside the student body. The practice of presenting pictures and statuary to the school has spread from the assembly and the classes to the general public; and the purchase of gymnasium apparatus by the assembly has induced the city to provide more spacious quarters for the gymnasium. But most interesting are the two instances in which the assembly following doubtless the example of Mr. Carnegie, has announced to the city government that, if the city would appropriate a specified amount for some needed improvement, the assembly would appropriate an equal sum. In each case the city has accepted the assembly's proposition; and a new piano and new slate blackboards are the results.

To overestimate the value of the Cony High School Assembly as training for citizenship is, of course, easy. We must remember that many boys take no part in its discussions; that many girls attend its meetings only because they are required to attend. But at least this

¹ To this amount must be added an appropriation of \$125 for the gymnasium, made from the proceeds of the first fair before the assembly was in existence.

may be said: Each pupil that graduates from the Cony High School has lived for four years in a community where his labor contributes to the common fund, and where his voice helps to determine how it shall be spent. He has gained at least some knowledge of parliamentary procedure, some notion of financial accountability, some consciousness of the difference between wisdom and extravagance in public appropriations. In the character thus formed is the true preparation for citizenship.